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The Importance of Differentiated Leadership and Leading for Equity in Higher Education: How Higher Education Transformed My Life

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***The Importance of Differentiated Leadership
and Leading for Equity in Higher Education:
How Higher Education Transformed My Life***

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Abstract

Statistically speaking, I should have become a lot of things I am not. I grew up homeless (low socio-economic status), lived in battered women shelters (witness to domestic abuse), fatherless (single-parent household), was a father at 16 years old (teen pregnancy), attended six different elementary schools in four different states (California, Texas, Ohio, and Tennessee) by the time I was in fifth grade (student mobility), and was the first in my family to graduate from college (first-generation college student). A quick search on research with regards to any one of these demographics or characteristics will yield statistics on who I should have become. However, the aim of my essay is to share how my experiences in higher education truly transformed my life. Through a whole lot of grit, a loving and hardworking mother, caring professors, and sometimes, what I call “tough love”, I was able to overcome such impediments. It is my hope by sharing my story in this essay, that others, with similar backgrounds, will find hope for a better future, either through higher education, or by other means that directly align with their deepest passion and upmost long-term goals. In addition, and perhaps just importantly, I hope by sharing my story that individuals serving in higher education understand the importance of their leadership and how it can affect the students and/or staff in which they lead and serve.

Introduction

As individuals serving in higher education, it is vital to fully understand the implications of our leadership and its impact as it applies to both the students and staff in which we serve. Perhaps most importantly, as it applies to students and staff who have backgrounds and experience much different than our own. As such, we must lead for equity and ensure every student and staff member have what they need to succeed, regardless of their demographics (i.e., ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) or characteristics (i.e., first-generation college student, low socio-economic student, parents’ education, etc.). Leading for equity can be difficult, especially when individuals in leadership roles, rather it be an adjunct instructor, assistant/associate/full/emeritus professor, members of the university leadership team or university president/chancellor, may not

“differentiated leadership¹.” That is, much like a teacher implements differentiated instruction in a given classroom with their students, we as leaders in higher education, must be able to offer differentiated leadership to the students and staff in which we serve. This type of

¹ Differentiated leadership, much like differentiated instruction, is the ability to lead in such a way that you meet the needs of every individual you lead, regardless of the differences of each individual under your leadership. Much like students in a classroom, all individuals in an organization vary in culture, socio-economic status, language, gender, motivation, ability/disability, personal interests, background, experiences, and more. As leaders, we must be cognizant of these differences, and lead accordingly. By building relationships and considering the varying needs of the individuals we lead, only then can we tailor and develop personalized leadership that meets the needs of each individual. Thus, leading in such a way that allows each individual to thrive and reach their full potential.

leadership takes an attentive effort in getting to know the individuals we serve, again, rather it be students or faculty members. In doing so, our aim can be to build meaningful and lasting relationships that allow us to have an ongoing positive impact on the individuals we lead as well as help us better understand their background and experiences so that we can ensure students and faculty members reach their full potential. Furthermore, we must be cognizant that, although a strong effort to relate to such individuals is necessary, we must also fully understand that the degree to which we can relate to any given individual will not be the same as experiencing such hardships (or lack thereof) in “their shoes.” For example, my late grandpa Moran served in World War II. In many ways, he never came back from the war. In fact, my grandma Moran used to say that the last time she grandpa was when he left for the war. He was a tank commander and fought in two major campaigns including the Battle of the Bulge and Normandy. Towards the end of the war, in a lesser known battle, a reconnaissance mission in Northern Germany, a tank in his platoon was hit and exploded. He happened to be outside the top of his tank holding binoculars when shrapnel hit him in the back of his head. He vaguely remembers crawling out of the tank and sitting up against the tracks of his M4 Sherman tank. He then pulled out a leather booklet he kept in his uniform chest pocket. On the left side was a picture of my grandpa and grandma, on the right side was a picture of all of their children including my father. Thinking he was going to die, he prayed (and bled) over the leather booklet (we still have the blood stained leather booklet) and lost consciousness. When he awoke in a hospital, he had a metal plate in his head.

He received the Purple Heart and was sent home. He suffered from narrow vision and migraines the rest of his life. When he returned home, he was never the same. What I am getting at here is that, although I might try to conceive what it was like for my grandpa Moran in World War II, the truth is, I probably could never fully understand or relate to what he saw or what he experienced. Thus, we must fully understand this before we “try to relate” to others with different backgrounds and experiences than our own. In fact, as someone who has a background of much hardships, it can almost be offensive when someone intends to fully understand what you have experienced. Much like the case with my grandpa Moran, although his war experience was long before they started diagnosing soldiers with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), if they had, I could envision him saying to his counselor (that he might meet with after returning from World War II and being diagnosed with PTSD) “you weren’t there, you don’t understand.” To some extent, this is true. However, we must not allow this barrier to divert our efforts to empathize with individuals with experiences and backgrounds much different than ours. It is also worth mentioning here that hardships come in all shapes and sizes. That is, for example, let’s look at socio-economic status (SES). I know individuals who had all the money in the world growing up, and really, all they ever wanted was to feel loved by their parents, and furthermore, they wish that their parents had spent more time with them. In contrast, I know individuals who were extremely poor growing up, but they had all of the love in the world from their parents, and likewise, spent quality time with their parents. It is like that quote by Abigail Van Buren, “If you want your

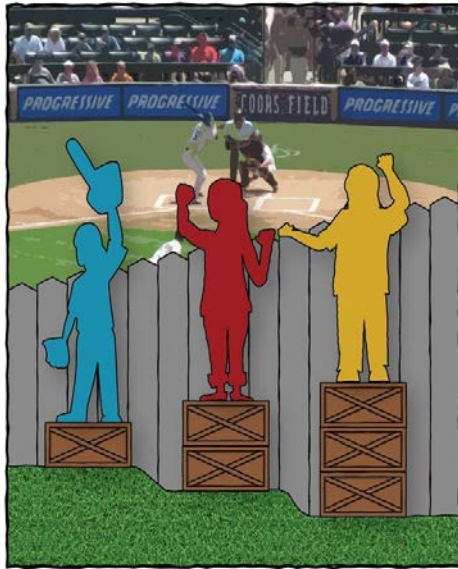
children to turn out well, spend twice as much time with them, and half as much money.” Unfortunately, we must not stereotype in this process of working with students and faculty members. We must understand that, as shared in this example, students with a higher-SES background does not always mean they had it any better than a student with a low-SES background. This is just one example of many I could provide. Nonetheless, the focus must remain the same. In order to lead for equity in higher education, we must implement differentiated leadership, and we can only do this effectively by getting to know our students and faculty members in such a way that we fully understand their needs and try to empathize with regards to who they are, what their needs are, and how we can meet those needs, with the sole focus of ensuring they have the resources they need to succeed and reach their full potential. In higher education, this is vital. After all, it is the one setting where so many walks of life converge with regards to SES, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and the like. It is a setting in which we can lead for equity, and differentiate our leadership to positively impact the students and staff we work with, in order to positively impact the world. In a world where inequities in wealth distribution, resource allocation, and quality of life are increasing (American Psychological Association, 2017), leaders in higher education can lead in such a way that it fosters a climate and culture amongst students and faculty to lead for equity, essentially making higher education the great equalizer in which lives will surely be transformed.

Below I have provided an image of equality versus equity (See Figure 1). As you read through this article, think about what it means to lead for equity in the higher education setting. That is, in the

case of the figure below, to provide enough crates for each of our students and faculty members to see the game. As you look at the image created by Kuttner (2016), might you reflect on the following...equality is equal (i.e., a crate for all), equal does not always mean fair, and equity is providing what each individual needs (i.e., enough crates to see the game). In addition, might the lower ground be historical oppression, the higher fence be systems of oppression, while the hole in the fence might represent persistence (Kuttner, 2016). As leaders in higher education, it is my contention, that it is our job to lead for equity with a long-term goal of removing the fence for all would be game watchers.



EQUALITY



EQUITY

Figure 1. Equality versus Equity (Kuttner, 2016).

Statistically Speaking

Since this essay is focused on sharing my story as it relates to my personal experiences in higher education, and furthermore, how higher education transformed my life, it would be a disservice of me not to be transparent about and/or report my own background and experiences. I grew up homeless (low socio-economic status), lived in battered women shelters (witness to domestic abuse), fatherless (single-parent household), was a father at 16 years old (teen pregnancy), attended six different elementary schools in four different states (California, Texas, Ohio, and Tennessee) by the time I was in fifth grade (student mobility), and was the first in my family to graduate from college (first-generation college student). However, through a whole lot of grit, a loving and hardworking mother, caring professors, and sometimes, what I call “tough love”, I

was able to overcome such impediments. Below I have broken down each of the demographics and characteristics² of my background as it relates to who and what I should have become, at least, statistically speaking.

Socio-economic status. The socio-economic status (SES) of a student, particularly as it applies to higher education is often determined by a students’ parental information such as income levels and level of education (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). The statistics associated with the SES of students in higher education is staggering. Overall, students with low-SES backgrounds enroll at colleges at a much lower rate (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). In fact, the United States Department of Education reported that students who came from households that earned \$20,000 or less only accounted for 8.7 percent of the freshmen student body nationally in colleges and universities (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). In addition, students from low-SES backgrounds often need more remedial education than their high-SES peers (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). In another article, it was reported that low-SES students were less likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher than students even from middle-SES backgrounds. The percentage further widened in comparison to students from higher-SES backgrounds (“Postsecondary Attainment: Differences

² Due to the overwhelming amount of research focused in each demographical area, I will only briefly highlight each for the purposes of this essay, that is, to shine light on these demographics and characteristics, especially as it applies to the higher education setting, and expected outcomes for such individuals, in general terms.

by Socioeconomic Status,” 2015). Additionally, this same article reported that students from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to attend college and/or graduate from college, compared to students from middle-SES and high-SES families.

As it applies to this essay, and perhaps more specifically, leading for equity, it was reported in an article by the American Psychological Association (2017) that the detrimental affects of low-SES are far-reaching and revealed inequities in access to and distribution of resources. In this article, low-SES was associated with lower education, poverty, and poor health. Another article by Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier and Maczuga (2009) reports that students of low-SES backgrounds develop academic skills slower than students from high-SES groups. Aikens and Barbarin’s (2008) article further supported what we know, that often a child’s SES determines their zip code, which is correlated with the type of education they receive. These children often attend schools that are underresourced, affecting a low-SES child’s education negatively from the start.

Witness to domestic abuse. In an article by the Childhood Domestic Violence Association (2014), it was reported that children who have experienced and/or are from homes of violence are more likely to experience significant psychological problems (both short and long-term), often meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (suggesting that the effects on their brains are similar to that of a combat veteran), are more likely to age prematurely (7-10 years), are six times more likely to commit suicide, 50 percent more likely to use drugs and alcohol, 74 percent likely to commit a violent crime, and three times more likely to repeat the cycle in

adulthood. The Child Witness to Violence Project (2017) reports that children who are exposed to domestic violence have a hard time focusing and concentrating in school, are easily distracted, have a hard time establishing good peer relationships, and tend to be more aggressive and fight more often.

Single-parent household. When it comes to single-parent household statistics, they can be troubling, not only to the children living in such settings, but also to our society as a whole. It appears that single motherhood is becoming the new norm across our nation (Dawn, 2017). It is reported that four out of 10 children are born to unwed mothers (Databank Indicator, 2017; Dawn, 2017), and that one in four children under the age of 18 are being raised without a father, and nearly half of them (45%) live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2014). In an article by the Lino (2013), it is reported that single mothers have little means to contribute to education expenses (I can certainly relate to this one as I had to take out student loans to pay for my undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees). Krein and Beller (1988) reported that the longer a child lives in a single-parent family, the more negative the affect it has on the child with regards to educational attainment. Furthermore, they found that this negative affect is greater for boys than girls (Krein & Beller, 1988). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), found that children in single-parent households are twice as likely to drop out of high school and twice as likely to become single parents themselves than children who live in a two-parent homes.

Teen pregnancy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), a total of 249,078 babies were born in 2014 to women who

were aged 15-19 years old, a birth rate of 24.2 per 1,000 women in this age group. In an article by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (2002), it is reported that teen pregnancy often “short circuit the education process and prevent young men and women from preparing themselves for good jobs and becoming established in the labor market” (p. 11). In addition, the article reports that teen parents are less likely to graduate high school and the detrimental effects of teen pregnancy, “when children have children, their opportunities are diminished right from the start, and the future is often one of poverty” (p. 11). In an article by Runzel (2017), it reported that teen fathers are more likely to get involved with criminal activity (i.e., alcohol, drug abuse, and drug dealing), less likely to graduate high school, earn less annually (than men who wait to have children in adulthood), and face a lack of teen programs focused on teenage fathers.

Student mobility. In an article by Sparks (2017), it was reported that student mobility may be a key indicator to identify vulnerable students. In addition, it is reported that student mobility is correlated with lower school engagement, poorer grades in reading and math, and a higher risk of dropping out of high school (Sparks, 2017). A study reported in the article (Sparks, 2015) that was conducted by New York University in 2015, found that the more students moved, the lower they scored on state assessments and on teacher observations of the students’ critical thinking skills. An article by Rumberger (2003) reported the consequences of student mobility as suffering psychologically, socially, and academically. Furthermore, student mobility was found to be associated with

misbehavior and youth violence, as well as hurting students academically (Rumberger, 2003). Studies on students of mobility that take into account background differences have found that “mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 9).

First generation college student. The barrage of problems arising from being a first-generation college student are hardly encapsulated in statistics as so many other factors are often not revealed by the numbers. For example, the lack of support from family members who do not fully understand why you are going to college versus entering the workforce can be a barrier (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2016). Wyatt and Mattern (2011) reported that students whose parents did not obtain a college degree were less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution. Of those who do enroll, three out of five will leave college within six years (The Council of Independent Colleges, 2016). In an article by Falcon (2015), it was reported that “first generation college students confront many distinctive challenges including lack of college readiness, financial stability, familial support, and self-esteem” (p. 1).

As you can see, having a background that includes all of the above, including being a student of low-SES, a witness to domestic abuse, growing up in a single-parent household, becoming a teen parent, experiencing high levels of student mobility, and being a first-generation college student were all challenges I had to overcome along the path of my journey. In reviewing the snapshot of research and statistics reported above, one might suspect where I should have ended up or who I might have become. In fact, you might find it somewhat surprising where I

ended up. However, statistics do not account for the spectacular, and remember, people like surprises.

People like Surprises

I was once called into the office in high school by our athletic director, Don Thorp. Coach Thorp is probably one of the most decorated high school baseball coaches in the nation. This was right around the time I had found out that my high school girlfriend was pregnant. Being a three sport star (i.e., football, basketball, & baseball) in high school, he was curious as to my plans to continue playing sports (as I was a junior at the time and just wrapped up football season), and of course, he wanted to give me some words of wisdom. Now, I hardly listened to anyone at that age, but when Coach Thorp called you to the office to speak with you, you sat up straight and listened intently. We talked about a lot of things, about my potential for an athletic scholarship if I was able to improve my grades, about my girlfriend being pregnant, about how life isn't fair, and many other things. But perhaps most importantly, we discussed what I was going to do with my life. I remember not really knowing at the time. In fact, my answer was "I don't know" followed by a lot of silence and Coach Thorp staring at me waiting for more. I did not say "I don't know" because I could not think of anything else to say, but because I really did not know. Up to that point, I do not believe anyone had really asked me that question. College seemed like the natural next step, but that was only because I had begun to receive athletic recruiting letters my sophomore year. Before that, I had honestly never thought about it. However, there was one thing towards the end of our conversation that rang in my head for years after. As we wrapped up the conversation focused on what I wanted to

do with my life, I stood up, shook his hand, and started to walk out, he said, "Denver, you know, people like surprises...surprise us Denver." I am not sure I really grasped what he meant until much later in my life. However, I thought a lot about it, and at some point, it became my motivation. To shed the statistics associated with me, and thrive anyway. One does not have to look far for such stories. There is Ole Miss alum Michael Oher, or Oprah Winfrey, Andy Andrews, and Mine That Bird. The point is, Coach Thorp was right, we all like a good surprise; the underdog winning or a success story no one saw coming. Let's look at how a horse shocked the world on a rainy day in 2009, a day I just so happen to be at the Kentucky Derby, right there at the finish line in the grandstands.

Now, I have often heard folks say they like numbers. I myself am a mixed-methods researcher, and although I enjoy the numbers (i.e., quantitative), I also enjoy the stories that accompany them (i.e., qualitative). That is, statistics are certainly helpful, but they do not account for everything, and they certainly don't always account for the spectacular (i.e., the outliers). I love the quote by Albert Einstein, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." For example, my wife and I attended the 2009 Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. It was a grand race indeed, and certainly one I thoroughly enjoyed as I myself always relish "the spectacular" or a good surprise. As you may know, this was the Kentucky Derby when a horse named Mine That Bird won the Derby. See, what is spectacular about this particular Derby is that, Mine That Bird was a 50-to-1 odds. To put that in layman's terms, the undersized thoroughbred racehorse was not supposed to win the race. Now, the

fact that he did win it, is considered perhaps the most monumental upset in Derby history. At the beginning of the race, it did not look good for Mine That Bird. In fact, he was so far in last place that NBC announcer, Tom Durkin failed to mention him several times as he ran through the line-up of horses and their places (Kentucky Derby, 2009). However, out of nowhere, Mine That Bird ridden by Calvin Borel blew past the group of horses on the inside rail and pulled away to win the race by the longest margin of victory in over 60 years. If you have not seen the race, it is worth taking a look at it. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hv8x9x5A49s> You see, as someone like myself who the statistics were stacked against, I had to learn to ignore them or accept them, and quite frankly, I was not going to accept them. However, I was smart enough to know that I could not do it alone. Just as jockey Calvin Borel knew he needed the expertise of Mine That Bird's trainer Chip Wooley³ to win the Derby, Mine That Bird needed an exceptional jockey like Borel, someone that, despite the horse being a 50-to-1 odd, still took the time to watch hours of film on him from previous races, believed in him, and fully understood what he needed (i.e., race strategy), our students and

³ Calvin Borel was not supposed to ride Mine That Bird in the Derby. He later reported (Soileau, 2009) that he was asked just three weeks before the Derby to ride Mine That Bird. Furthermore, he was the only jockey willing to listen to Mine That Bird's trainer, Chip Wooley. Upon studying film from previous races, along with the trainer, Calvin immediately realized the horse wasn't finishing as Chip had suggested. Furthermore, for the Derby, Chip told Calvin to hold the horse back, and focus on a come from behind win, which is exactly what he did. Again, Calvin was the only jockey Chip approached that was willing to ride Mine That Bird and implement his plan, which gave the horse exactly what it needed to win the race.

faculty need exceptional leaders who believe in them as well, and fully understand their needs, despite the odds (i.e., statistics). That is, the great leaders see greatness in others, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, and expect great things from them. It is not enough to ignore those backgrounds and experiences, however, it is important to understand them, embrace them, relate to them (as best we can), and help others move forward from them. As leaders in higher education, we must lead in such a way that fully understands the experiences and backgrounds that shape the students and faculty members we lead and work with. In doing so, we must also being cognizant of how we can help such individuals move past possible barriers, while ensuring we provide the necessary resources for them to thrive. I believe if we can lead in this manner, many more surprises will be had, both with our students and staff.

Turning Points

Much like the odds given to Mine That Bird, the statistics associated with my background and experiences are daunting to say the least. In the previous section, I shared the strategies used to help Mine That Bird overcome his odds, as well as events leading up to his victory. In this section, I will report what strategies or events happened along my journey as well as the turning points. Now, I assume the obvious question, for you the reader, may be two-fold; (1) how did I overcome such great odds to go on to obtain my doctorate degree, become a successful teacher and school administrator, and now, professor (and as it should be included, husband and father); and (2) in what ways can you the reader help others overcome such odds (shared in the discussion section). With that in mind, it would be extremely hard

for me to attempt to highlight one exact moment or personal characteristic that contributed to my ability to overcome such odds. Nonetheless, in thinking of one such item or personal characteristic, I tend to think of grit. However, I don't like to rely on grit as I feel it somehow implies I did it on my own, and quite frankly, that is not true for me, nor for anyone. Nevertheless, and perhaps worth mentioning, I do believe some relentless, consistent, persistence never hurt anyone when it came to dream chasing in any way, shape, or form. Again, for this section, I will attempt to highlight a few of the things I believe contributed to the process as a whole, at least for me. In addition, I will attempt to highlight some of the turning points along my journey. That is, stark moments and events throughout my life that contributed to my "overcoming the odds."

Upbringing. First and foremost, I must say I learned the importance of hard-work from my mother. My mother worked several jobs to raise my brother and I by herself. At the same time, we had a mother we knew loved us, and her first priority was always our well-being. That alone is a solid foundation for any child regardless of the other factors such as low-SES, student mobility, etc. I knew I had a champion, that is, someone who cared about me, believed in me, and had my well-being at the forefront of their every thought and action. I believe this is vital for any child to thrive, but perhaps more so, for a child with the demographics and characteristics I have highlighted as they relate to myself. Such children may need more, such college students may need more, and such faculty members may need more, as unlike their peers, their needs may be greater due to these demographics and characteristics. Furthermore, my mother was an optimist. During rough

times, I can still hear her singing the words to the song Ooh Child by the band The Five Stairsteps to my brother and I. She always focused on what we had, not on what we did not have. Even when we had so little, she always made it seem like so much. Thus, like her, I am an optimist in all situations, regardless of the odds. That being said, and perhaps worth mentioning here, I am also a realist, making calculated decisions while always being mindful of the long-term implications of such decisions. For example, based on my background, I am sure you could assume some of the friends I ran around with growing up. However, I always knew when to say no, and sadly, some of my childhood friends did not.

Fatherhood. Becoming a father at such a young age certainly made me grow up much faster than my peers. In this regard, it was a blessing. That is, for someone like myself who at the time, needed more structure, needed to start focusing on my education, and needed to begin to think more long-term about my goals for myself (and now for my family), it was certainly a blessing in disguise. In some respects, having a child is something you can never fully explain to someone who has never had a child. Essentially, there is a laser pinpoint time (i.e., birth) in your life that everything becomes so much more or less about you, and so much more about your child. This for me allowed me to relentlessly work 40-50 hours a week throughout my undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and doctoral degree programs. Now that my daughter, who attends The Ohio State University and is an Early Childhood Education major, is much older, I have showed her the bus stop on Ohio State's campus in front of the old 24-hour library that I used to exit the bus at each evening after work. I told her I always had a decision to make when I got

off that bus; (1) head directly into the library to study and complete my school work; or (2) walk home and get some much needed sleep. I told her I would think of her and head into the library no matter how tired I was from my shift at work. I know she is grateful for this now, as well as for the father I am and have always been to her. She has always been light years ahead of me with regards to her academics and faith. In fact, she has made the Dean's list every semester of her collegiate career, is on a full academic scholarship, and is a bible study leader for *Real Life*. She spends her spring breaks visiting popular spring break destinations or visiting inner-city Chicago neighborhoods encouraging anyone from college aged students to the elderly to accept God in their life. She is quite truly amazing.

PreK-12 educational experience. It goes without saying that I had great educators and coaches throughout my life and within the PreK-12 educational setting no matter where I was geographically, be it in Ohio, Texas, California, or Tennessee. For the most part, I had teachers who were truly invested in my education and helping me reach my full potential. Likewise, I also had what I would call not-so-great teachers and coaches. For example, upon finding out my high school girlfriend was pregnant, I started going to class, doing my homework, and actually studied and did my homework. Thus, it was no surprise that I made the honor roll shortly thereafter. I was sitting in class one day when I was notified by the school intercom that everyone who made the honor roll was invited to the cafeteria to have donuts. Being one of the first to arrive, I grabbed a donut, a carton of milk, and sat down. As everyone filled into the

cafeteria, our principal profoundly announced to all of the students in the cafeteria "please excuse Denver, he is not used to being at these gatherings" as apparently we were supposed to wait to grab a donut and milk. Of course, I thought to myself, this guy is a real jerk. Furthermore, I thought about the fact that he does not know how to lead a school. However, for me, it was a learning moment – as this is how I have learned to chalk up such moments throughout my life. That is, I learned to never lead a school in such a manner, to never embarrass a student, especially when they are making progress. In addition, this particular school leader is one of the main reasons I study ethics as they apply to school leadership today (Fowler, Edwards, & Hsu, 2017; Posthuma, Fowler, & Tsai, 2016; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). It is my contention that you have to go through life thinking everything that happens, happens for a reason. This particular experience led me to my research agenda, and I happen to enjoy conducting research in this area. Thus, I must see the positive in it. It also made me a better school leader, because I will never forget the way it made me feel. It is like I tell my students who are aspiring school leaders, "I have worked with some of the best school leaders and teachers in the world, and I have worked with some of the worst, but the key is, I learned a great deal from both experiences." Some of the great teachers and coaches I had in my life were individuals such as Mr. Crozier, my 5th grade teacher, Mr. Don Thorp, my high school baseball coach, middle school physical education teacher, and later, my high school athletic director, and my high school basketball coach Mr. Rob Smith, who is still coaching basketball today, and so many more. When I think of all the

people who have contributed to my success, I think of the following quote, “It takes a village to raise a child.” That is to say, we are all responsible for each other’s well-being, especially the well-being of children.

Higher education experience. Keeping with the theme of this essay, as it applies to the higher education setting, I had some of the best professors at every level of education I received in higher education. There was Dr. Samuel Hodge at The Ohio State University, who always pushed me well beyond what I thought I could accomplish academically during the completion of my undergraduate degree. There was Dr. Bill McGlothlin and Dr. Bevin Shiverdecker at Mount Vernon Nazarene University during the completion of my Masters degree, who inspired me to be a dedicated educator and later, to become a school leader. There was Dr. Lawrence (Larry) Burgess in my Principals license program at Ohio University who took my aspiration to become a school leader, and helped turn it into a reality by preparing me to be the best school leader I could be. There was Dr. Connie Calloway in my superintendent license program (also at Ohio University) who took my ambition to be a superintendent by preparing me to be one. Through all of her stories of leading Detroit City Public Schools, I gained great insight as to what it meant to work in, and around, all of the obstacles that may stand in our way to ensure we always do what is best for each and every child. During my superintendent internship, there was Dr. Thomas Tucker (two-time *National Superintendent of the Year*), Dr. Richard Ross (former state superintendent in the State of Ohio), and Mr. Jack Fette allowing me to learn from them “on the job” as well as what it means to effectively lead a school district. Then there was Dr.

Jerry Johnson and Dr. Gordon Brooks who spent countless hours with me throughout the dissertation process. Not only did their commitment help me in finishing a quality dissertation, it was a great example of how dedicated we should be to our own doctoral students as they navigate the process. Thus, I always aim to pass such dedication on to my doctoral students. During my time as an adjunct instructor at Ohio State, I had the opportunity to work under great leaders such as Dr. Gordon Gee, Dr. Paul Sanders, and many others. Here at The University of Mississippi, I have had the opportunity to work with many great students, faculty members, and leaders – too many to list. It goes without saying that all of these individuals and so many others were certainly motivating factors or influences along my journey, and still are today. However, if there was one turning point, believe it or not, it may have come in the most insensitive of forms. That is, if I had to single it down to one turning point in higher education, it was the “tough love” talk I received from an academic advisor during the completion of my undergraduate degree. Now, before I share this story, unless she was a great actor (and some of us leaders/mentors can be), I believe her real intent was for me to drop out of college right then and there. However, her words did just the opposite, they lit a fire in me. At the time, I was working 40-50 hours a week, I was taking 12-16 credit hours a quarter, and as you can imagine, I hardly slept. At this time in my life, I was regularly getting 5-6 hours of sleep a night. This coupled with my responsibilities as a father were starting to take a toll on my grades. In fact, it landed me on academic probation. Upon receiving this notification, I decided I had better go meet with my academic advisor and figure out what I needed to do in order to get my grade point average (GPA) up

and get into the College of Education, which was the next step for me at that time in my collegiate career. At this meeting, she sat me down, showed me my current GPA, calculated and walked me through what it would take for me to raise it to a 3.0, and politely said, “you know, college isn’t for everybody.” I was shocked by what I had just heard. She followed up by saying, “if you drop out before such and such date, you won’t be charged anything.” I could not believe what I was hearing. Nonetheless, back then I was much more tactful than I am now (not necessarily a good thing). I had the wits about me to do two things; (1) I asked her to go over what I needed to do in great detail (this time I paid attention and even took notes); and (2) I politely told her I needed to think more about rather or not I wanted to drop out of college (knowing I was not going to). After that conversation, I remember driving home and thinking, I am going to make A’s from here on out. Although I did not earn A’s for every course I took after that meeting, I certainly made A’s and B’s with the occasional C, of course I was no longer on academic probation, and yes, I was accepted into the College of Education. Nonetheless, it was the turning point most identifiable to me. It was the turning point for my undergraduate experience, and perhaps, my life, and what would become of me. Although I do not believe her intentions were noble, I took her intentions, whatever they were, and used them as motivation. I have shared this story before, and I am often met with the same response, “not everyone would of reacted the way you did.” In fact, I have had individuals who I have shared this story with tell me they probably would of listened to her. In that respect, I have to thank my mother for raising me to be an optimist and to

question everything. I learned a long time ago not to listen to people who tell you what they think you are capable of. As what they are really telling you is what they believe they are capable of.

Continuing with the higher education setting, it provides an opportunity to connect with students and faculty who may not have the same background and experiences that you have, or may not share the same ethnicity or nationality you have, or may not share the same religious beliefs you have, and this is very much a positive in so many ways. I have always enjoyed making new friends and getting to know people from different backgrounds and cultures. In some respects, I have always been curious in this way. I believe it stems from my student mobility background. That is, I had to learn to make friends and make them quick. But in the same breath, I believe I am naturally curious of all things, not just people and other cultures. Nonetheless, the friends I made in college at all levels of my academic career have taught me quite a bit about life, and myself. That is, I believe I have learned as much from them as they may have learned from me, especially as it relates to different perspectives on all things in this life. This is just another added advantage of serving in the higher education setting, the ability to learn and grow through relationships you build with both students and faculty members, and this is just one more way we can begin to lead for equity, by building lasting and meaningful relationships with our students and faculty members regardless of our roles (or theirs) at the university.

Gratitude. I felt it would be a disservice to the reader if I did not include this section. Thus, I wanted to include

gratitude, as I believe it is a large part of what we need to do when we receive help from others. That is, don't forget to say thanks, and certainly "don't forget to send the elevator back down" or "pass it on." I have always been quick to thank the individuals who have helped me along the way and give credit where credit is due. For example, we were back watching a football game at my old high school years ago. My mother was with me and Coach Thorp walked up and was talking with us. After we were finished talking, as he was having health issues at the time, he said he was going to leave and we were saying goodbye. I had already thanked him a million times before, but I thanked him again anyway. Likewise, my mother gave him a big hug, and with tears in her eyes, said, "thank you for all you have done for my boys." I think it was the only time I saw Coach Thorp tear up. What I am getting at here is, we often do not know all of the lives we touch. But it certainly feels good to know when we have made a positive impact. It goes without saying that we do not lead or help others in order to receive a pat on the back or recognition. However, throughout the years, I have found that the timely emails, cards, letters, and phone calls reminding me of how I have touched someone's life is fulfilling and makes ones' spirit feel good. Additionally, it helps refuel the tank when it is low, that is, when we feel like we're not making an impact at all. When the opportunity presents itself (or maybe you need to create the right opportunity), be sure to thank people for their part in your story, and equally important, pass it on, be a part of someone's success story.

Serve to Lead

I have always found the most gratifying and rewarding work to be that of service. I truly believe that leadership starts with

service to others. I have also found, at least in my experience, that it is through service that I found myself, who I wanted to be, and furthermore, my true calling. I share this because I want leaders in higher education to fully understand the excitement of being part of someone's success story, rather it be a student or faculty member. There is little to nothing more rewarding than hearing how you were part of someone's success story. That you had a part in it. That is what it is all about my friends. It is no less the reason why I continue to give back by serving. For example, this past year I served as a Ronald E. McNair Program⁴ mentor. Through this service, I had the opportunity to mentor a student through a large-scale research project. I am happy to report that this student has presented this research nationally and published it in a magazine. In addition, this student will present her research internationally and publish it in an international peer-reviewed journal, all before she completes her bachelor's degree. It is the same reason why I volunteered to teach the freshmen common book at The Ohio State University when I was an adjunct instructor there several years ago. It gave me the opportunity to serve in a capacity that was focused on utilizing the book *Outcasts United* (John, 2009) where I had the opportunity to lead students through lectures, workshops, and classroom exercises with one common goal in mind,

⁴ McNair participants are either first-generation college students with financial need, or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate education, and have demonstrated strong academic potential. The goal of the McNair Scholars Program is to increase graduate degree awards for students from underrepresented segments of society (Ronald E. McNair, 2017).

to celebrate and embrace our differences rather it be gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious beliefs, etc. It is why I still coach youth football, basketball, baseball, and soccer today – to give back to the community. It is why I am the Public Relations Chair for my Rotary Club. It is why I conduct all those reviews each year for the many professional organizations of which I belong, or why I started The Mississippi Association of Professors of Educational Leadership. It is because quite simply, I believe that “you’re below leadership if you’re above service” and as my mother always said “every hand fits a broom.”

Discussion

As you read through this article, it is my hope that you have begun to think of ways you might lead for equity and utilize differentiated leadership in your current role, wherever and whatever it may be. By discussing my own story, and how my experiences in higher education transformed my own life, it is my hope that you are able to use my story to further support the importance of your leadership in higher education, not only as it applies to students, but also to faculty members. Below I have shared just a few strategies in bullet-point form that you can utilize as you lead for equity, and differentiate your leadership. As you read through them, remember, “action reveals commitment.”

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood – with regards to all students and faculty.
- Support/implement faculty teaching the way students learn.
- Get to know students and faculty members. Build meaningful and lasting relationships so that you

might fully understand their needs, and then aim to meet those needs.

- Create opportunities for social interactions for both students and faculty members.
- Provide collaborative learning opportunities for students and faculty members.
- Support/implement a culturally responsive pedagogy meeting the needs of all students and faculty members.
- Focus on equitable and inclusive practices in all things higher education as it relates to students and staff.

Finally, I thought it would be valuable if I shared a quote from Rev. Dr. Samuel Dewitt (SDP Conference, 2011). Many believe Dr. Dewitt has helped more African-Americans complete their doctoral degree than any other professor. Nonetheless, as you read the quote, we might think of the scratch line as living comfortably, that is, in which an individual has access to all of the resources they need. Furthermore, might we think of a world where inequities in wealth distribution, resources, and quality of life no longer exist. A world where the fence no longer exists and everyone can watch the game, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, and regardless of their demographics and characteristics.

Now all through my neighborhood,
there were other young fellas...they
started life

beneath the scratch line, I started
life way above the scratch line...now if we
want these

bones to live again, those of us who have inherited benefits that we did not earn or

deserve, need to turn around and help those who inherited deficits that they did not earn

or deserve, and help them to rise up to the scratch line, where we are, so that they may

earn and enjoy all of the benefits that we so take for granted.

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Martin Luther King Treasury*, 1964

We are losing the ability to understand anything that's even vaguely complex.

--Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, 2014

Higher education transforms lives in too many ways to count. Transformation may occur at the community level through service projects taken on by enthusiastic student volunteers. It may come from new inventions that change the world. It can also happen on an individual level, not only in the lives and communities touched by the fruits of education, but also in the learners themselves. One of the most profound transformations I have witnessed comes from radical changes in students' worldviews as they move from rigid, binary thinking to a more complex, flexible ability to understand, analyze, and integrate multiple perspectives. Higher education involves a "difficult journey

toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one's area of study, and one's self" (Moore, 2002, "Review of Model"). I see the results of this cognitive shift in every aspect of my professional experience: teaching, research, practice, and service. Each aspect involves a different motivator and manifestation of the shift, but each paves the way for transformation.

I teach in the masters of social work program at my institution, where students are learning to provide clinical mental health services. It is common for students to go straight to the worst-case scenario—what do I do if my client is suicidal? What do I do if my client is using drugs? The students who are early in the program want The Right Answer: this is what you do in that situation. They are frustrated by any response that includes "it depends." As students' progress through the program, they become more comfortable with the idea that we do not have a definitive, foolproof intervention to use with suicidal and/or drug using clients. The Answer is not known. We, as a profession, simply do the best we can to respond to each unique situation with the tools that research and practice wisdom show have the best chance of success. My task is to support and challenge students in all stages of development so that they may move toward comfort and skill in spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity reign.

If the transformation is successfully made, creative solutions become more likely. Social work is a profession grounded in problem-solving. Freed from the rigid application of right and wrong, problem-solving flourishes. I see this growth reflected in the contrasting ways that beginning and advanced students approach case studies. Beginning students will immediately launch into

trying to find an answer when presented with a one paragraph client scenario. Advanced students want more information. They have become more adept at negotiating the subtleties of a situation and thus realize that problem-solving is context-specific.

Epistemological theory helps to explain these anecdotal observations. William Perry developed a seminal model of how students develop cognitively as they progress through higher education (Perry, 1970, 1999). In general, the model describes how students move from very basic to more complex thinking. The first two categories of Perry's model, dualism and multiplicity, are most relevant to this paper, as studies show that students rarely move beyond multiplicity before graduation (Granello, 2002; Simmons & Fisher, 2016). According to the model, dualistic students have an absolutist view of knowledge. There are right and wrong answers to all problems, Authority (capitalization in original) is a trusted source of knowledge, and the role of the instructor is to provide the right answer. In later stages of dualism, students move to a view that the role of the instructor is to show them how to find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). When confronted with disagreement among authorities, students in dualism look to instructors to tell them which is right, and can become frustrated when the answer is not forthcoming.

Multiplicity also has two stages: early and late (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in early multiplicity come to accept that diversity of opinions can be legitimate, but see the divergence as temporary. They believe that if one tries hard enough, the right answers can be found. Instead of merely having two

categories of knowledge, right and wrong, there are now three: right, wrong, and not yet known (Moore, 2001). Instructors should help them find the answers, and if they refuse to name one correct right answer to a dilemma, it is merely because the instructor is using some sort of a technique to help the student learn how to find the right answer.

The transition to late multiplicity involves an essential separation from Authority—students in this position understand that Authority may never find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). The third category of knowledge now includes “we’ll never know for sure;” therefore, how one thinks about something becomes paramount (Moore, 2001, “Multiplicity: Positions 3-4”). Although the instructor can be the source for the process of thinking, she can also be completely discounted (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in late multiplicity believe that their role is to learn to think for oneself and learn to use supportive evidence.

One multi-layered example of this development happened during a course designed to teach students to be clinical supervisors. Clinical supervision is an interactive, reflective process that promotes the professional development of supervisees, while ensuring that agency needs are met. Over the course of the semester, a student who was already providing supervision in her agency realized that she was providing solutions for her supervisees' problems, rather than helping them learn to find their own solutions. Her understanding of her own role shifted from providing answers (dualism) to helping the students learn to think (multiplicity) as she herself developed along these lines.

Use of the Perry Scheme to study student development has quantified this change. In the field of social work, the field experience, or internship, is the signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). During the field experience, students experience a transformation in which they move from trying to figure out The Right Answer for a hypothetical client in a sterile classroom environment to understanding how to use their knowledge and skills to help an actual client find his or her own right answer in the real world. An investigation into the mechanism of this change using the Perry Scheme revealed that at the end of their internship, students are transitioning between early and late multiplicity (Simmons & Fisher, 2016). They are making the critical transition to the ability to trust themselves to think through extremely complex dilemmas with their clients and arrive at solutions. Perry's analysis of the development of cognitive complexity suggests that higher education has transformed them from receptacles of information to adept independent users of that information.

In the field of clinical social work, this transformation in social work students provides the foundation for helping future clients transform their own lives in turn. Facilitating the process of therapy and counseling requires cognitive complexity (see, Kindsvatter & Desmond, 2013). If the clinical social worker is not cognitively complex herself, she will be unable to provide effective services. Critical therapeutic skills include empathy, the ability to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and the ability to develop complex conceptualizations of clients and their issues. Research has linked cognitive complexity to these essential qualities.

Furthermore, many of the most widely used therapies today help clients to identify, deconstruct, and then reconstruct their ways of knowing. Cognitive therapy, at its most basic, helps clients by identifying harmful automatic thoughts and replacing those thoughts (Beck, 2011). This requires clients to examine and challenge their sources of knowledge—as in multiplicity, they must learn to think for themselves and use supportive evidence to develop their way of thinking. For example, an automatic thought might be, “I am terrible at this job.” The process of cognitive therapy is to identify the thought, examine the evidence for it, then create a new thought based a more positive view of the evidence. Similarly, modalities such as narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy are based on constructivist theories—the client must first question the source of her harmful beliefs, then work to create a more positive story. Because higher education has introduced the therapist to an analogous form of cognitive complexity, she will be adept at helping others negotiate this process.

Cognitively complexity not only opens the door to helping others, but also creates possibilities for self-transformation. Although I have not personally taught incarcerated students, I am privileged to provide support and service to colleagues who do so. One such course was the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, taught at a maximum-security prison in our state (Keena & Simmons, 2015). That program produced changes in the worldview of its participants that helped the participants move from dualistic thinking to more flexible ways of viewing their post-release employment options. I hear similar stories of transformation from colleagues who teach in a program called the Prison-to-College-Pipeline Project, which provides

courses for college credit at the same maximum-security prison. The men are able to see new possibilities for their lives through the program (Smith, 2015). Indeed, studies show that higher education transforms the lives of people who are incarcerated by reducing recidivism and increasing chances of employment upon release (Davis et al. 2013), results that can be linked to a change in worldview and movement into more complex thinking (Keena & Simmons, 2015).

So often, an apparent lack of options is a barrier to transformation. People who are more cognitively complex are empowered to find or create options because they have moved beyond the confines of binary thinking. Higher education helps facilitate this empowerment in students. Once achieved, the state of cognitive complexity is in itself transformational, enabling students to help transform others, our communities, and the world.

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